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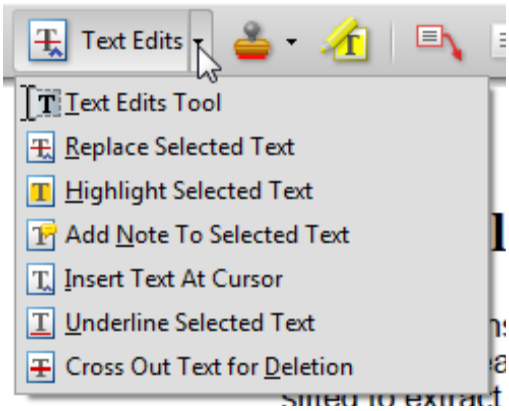

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SEX AS SPECTACLE

An Overview of Gender and Sexual Scripts in Teen Series Popular with Flemish Teenagers

Elke Van Damme and **Sofie Van Bauwel**

In recent years, research focusing on representations of sexuality in entertainment has gained momentum. Television content can sometimes be characterized as "hypersexual," and according to Jacobson (2005), such "hypersexual" representations can be found in two-thirds of programs. However, beyond offering teenagers more sexual content, the nature of the content has also changed. Using a qualitative textual analysis, this article gives an overview of the gender scripts represented in series that are popular with Flemish teenagers: One Tree Hill, Gossip Girl, Skins, Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and* 16+ *. Specifically, this article focuses on the relation between gender and sexuality. Sex(uality) has become part of the spectacle, and the tendency to "casualize" sexuality is apparent. This pinpoints the possibility that it may be time to reconsider sexual license in the twenty-first century as part of youth-as-fun instead of youth-as-trouble.*

KEYWORDS casualized; sexuality; gender scripts; sex as spectacle; sexuality; teen television series; youth

Introduction

The identities of teenagers are shaped within a complex and contradictory cultural landscape in which television, online communication, and teen culture are intertwined (Johansson, 2007). Media, and more specifically American-made media products, are predominant in the everyday lives of teenagers (Osgerby, 2004), and these media may provide teenagers "with symbolic resources for constructing or expressing their own identities" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 5). Although media do not offer a translucent window to the world, they do shape our view of reality and offer us tools for interpreting our relationships and defining our identities. Unlike the work of cultivation theorists, this article assumes that young media consumers do not simply adopt the reality represented on-screen. From a cultural studies perspective, the relationships between screen culture and certain attitudes and behaviors are more nuanced and complex. Moreover, media are not the only distributors of meaning; peers, parents, and school are other socialization agents that must be taken into account. Furthermore, viewers are media literate and critical consumers. However, since we live in a mediated reality, it is necessary to study the content of contemporary programs targeted at teenagers. Consequently, youth media can provide a site for teen identity construction, since it allows viewers to simultaneously identify with it and watch it from a distanced, ironic position (Povlsen, 2003). Thus, the evaluation of teen television content is necessary.

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We approach gender as a social construction of femininity and masculinity, and believe that gender is created and recreated through human interactions and in social life (West & Zimmerman, 1987). A specific set of roles constructed by cultural traditions, moral codes, economy, and politics is attached to a gender identity (Jacobson, 2005). However, those roles are not stable; they differ across time and space (Butler, 2006, p. 91). School, parents, peers, and media are all agencies that help us along in our gendered world. In most societies, gender reflects prestige and power, thereby creating inequality. This inequality is also reflected and constructed in media (Lorber, 1997). Thus, a certain ideology and social power are reflected in fictional representations. Since gender and other ideological nodal points, such as sexuality, are intertwined and cannot be completely separated (Bindig, 2008, p. 21), we will analyze the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity underlying the representations of gender roles in contemporary teen television shows. More specifically, we will aim to investigate the presence (or lack thereof) of stereotypical representations of gender in teen series, with a specific emphasis on representations of sexuality. Our research questions are as follows.

RQ1: What are the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity underlying representations of non-sexual gender roles?

RQ2: What are the kinds of ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity underlying representations of gender roles linked with sexuality?

This article will provide an overview of the general results of our qualitative textual analysis of five popular youth-oriented series: *One Tree Hill*, *Gossip Girl*, *Skins*, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and *16 +* . The results of two of our case studies have already been published (see Van Damme, 2010a; Van Damme, 2010b) and are the starting points of this article.

The Teenage World on Television

The field of cultural studies is characterized by a wide variety of (interdisciplinary) scholarship, concerned with culture, ideology, privilege and oppression (Ott & Mack, 2010). However, it took until the 1960s, before youth were studied as a crucial point of cultural (re)production and cultural change, and for youth studies to be established as a full-fledged research discipline (Driscoll, 2002). The researchers of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham (e.g., Hebdige, 1979) were the first to focus on youth, new youth cultures, and subcultures as a site for resistance. Their studies, however, were almost exclusively on boys and young men. In 1975, the exclusion of girls and young women in the research of the CCCS was critiqued by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (Driscoll, 2002). It was under the influence of McRobbie and Garber that gender was added "to established patterns of analyzing class, consumption and cultural production" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 186) and that youth studies were addressed from a feminist cultural studies perspective (McRobbie, 2000).

A limited number of studies analyze the representations of teenagers in teen drama series, and most have employed quantitative content analysis instead of a qualitative approach. We believe, however, that it is not only important to know the frequency of certain representations, but also to study *how* they are depicted. The nature of teenage representations is, for instance, studied by Heintz-Knowles (2000), who argued that

teenagers in entertainment television are not motivated or driven by school-related issues, but by peer relationships, sports and hobbies, family, and romance. In the teen drama series of the 1990s and 2000s, the characters cope with problems involving romance, sexuality, friendship, and family issues. According to Thiel-Stern (2008), *Beverly Hills 90210* was one of the first teen soaps, and it "... seemed to spawn a genre of shows casting beautiful young people, who are supposed to be teens, but actually look 10 years older than your average teen" (Thiel-Stern, 2008). Especially in American teen dramas, as Aubrun & Grady (2000) state, teenagers are portrayed as "super-individuals" or "as models of what American adults wish they themselves could be" (p. 8). Teenagers are more likely to be represented as autonomous, rather than in mentoring relationships. Therefore, it is not surprising that the teens, as "super-individuals," solve many of their problems without help from adults.

Contradictory findings about female teenage characters in television drama confirm yet confound traditional gender stereotypes. Female teenage stereotypes are common; a girl's looks are depicted as more important than her intelligence, and the plots involving teenage girls center on dating and shopping (Garber, 2002; Kim et al., 2007; Signorielli, 2007, pp. 174–175). Typically, all female characters in high school plan to attend college, and many serve as positive role models, representing independent women who can solve their own and others' problems. These examples illustrate individual agency and empowerment; however, the same programs contain many stereotypical representations of relationships, careers, and appearance. We do not see young men participating in stereotypically female activities such as grooming, doing the dishes, cooking, or shopping, and girls are often portrayed as sneaky. The majority of the girls are (very) thin, and the physical appearance of more than a quarter of them is acknowledged by other characters (Jacobson, 2005, pp. 27–29; Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 147). Appearance and beauty are portrayed as vital to a girl's self-esteem and necessary to attract a partner (Kim et al., 2007; Ross, 2010). However, the thinness trend and the focus on a sexy, slim body has appeared only recently, Thiel-Stern (2008) believes. In the bodily representations of the cast of the original *Beverly Hills 90210* series, she sees female characters with "... hips, wider thighs, vaguely pronounced muscles and heads that appear to belong on top of their body. By the standards of the 1990s, these actresses were thin and pretty. Members of the original cast were hardly sexualized at all," in contrast to the characters in the remake.

The world in (American) youth-oriented television programs is disproportionally male, and "female characters are significantly more likely than male characters to be attractive and provocatively dressed. [...] Research has shown that they disproportionately sexually objectify women" (Zurbriggen et al., 2007, p. 5). Objectification is the process through which female characteristics such as beauty and looking sexy are valued over, for instance, intelligence. Boys are offered more consistent media representations about how to be a man—though stereotypes are also apparent. Male characters drink and smoke, and use physical force more often than girls. They tend to have athletic, muscular bodies, highlighted by their clothes. Furthermore, in contrast to the female characters, their physical appearance is seldom the subject of discussion. The boys are characterized by their abilities and talents, not their looks (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002, p. 3; Signorielli, 2007, pp. 174–175). Further, boys are often connected with "doing" in the public sphere (e.g., rationality, aggressiveness, ambition), whereas girls are associated with "being" (e.g., emotions, caretakers, sensitive, dependent). This usually results in a teenage boy being the hero, saving a (passive) girl. Although heroines have become more common in teen television recently, their sexy appearance is overemphasized (Lemish, 2010).

Studies (e.g., Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Ward, Gorvine, & Cytron, 2002; Zurbriggen et al., 2007) focusing on sexual representations of teens stress the pervasiveness of sexual comments and remarks on television; sexual representations are more abundant in popular teen programs than ever before. A troubling aspect of the portrayals has emerged in the context of images of sexual behavior (Kellner, 1995), as sex and sexuality are depicted in clichéd and stereotypical ways. The sexual content itself has changed as well: the characters have their first sexual encounter at a younger age, and the encounters do not necessarily take place within a committed relationship (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely & Finnerty, 2007, p. 317). Some concerns are that today's sexual portrayals are "too explicit," "too much," and "too unrealistic" (Ward et al., 2002, p. 96). Furthermore, sexually active characters rarely take precautions against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). More importantly, they seldom experience consequences as a result of their sexual actions (Aubrey, 2004; Hust, Brown & L'Engle, 2008; L'Engle, Brown & Kenneavy, 2006; Wright, 2009), and having sex is suggested as normative in a committed relationship (Gunter, 1995, p. 5). Girls initiate sexual dialogue more than they initiate sex itself (Aubrey, 2004, p. 510). According to Batchelor, Kitzinger and Burtney (2004), boys generally take the first step toward sexual relations. Positively, female teens regularly vocalize whether they are ready for sex; however, certain limitations are found, since the girls who voice their sexual desires openly are often depicted as bad (Aubrey, 2004). Moreover, girls are solely responsible for contraception and addressing their boundaries. There are few examples of (male) teens raising concerns about safe sex in contemporary programs (Batchelor et al., 2004). Another stereotype is the representation of a boy who has sex with as many girls as he can, because a "real man" never turns down an opportunity for sex (Brown et al., 2002, p. 3; Kim et al., 2007; Signorielli, 2007, pp. 174–175). This double standard results in boys' sexuality being encouraged and rewarded, with male characters portrayed as active choosers, or even predators, in contrast to the passivity, restriction, and compliance of female sexuality (Aubrey, 2004, p. 506). Virginity loss is often incorporated in the narration of teen drama. For boys, this results in a higher social status (virginity as a stigma), and teenage girls' physical desires are hardly explored (Kelly, 2010).

This overview shows that "teen media depict a manipulated and gratuitous sexuality, based on unrealistic body images, constraining gender stereotypes and, all too frequently, the degradation of women" (Schor, 2004, p. 20). Although teen TV has been studied in the past, it remains useful to analyze the genre for its negotiation of ideological tropes in order for us to understand the shifts and dynamics in representations of teenagers. Moreover, the sample of series selected for this study consists of American, Flemish, British and Canadian contemporary teen drama series, which adds value to this research and the field of youth studies.

Methodology

The qualitative method of a thematic textual analysis was used to analyze the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity underlying the representations of gender roles in contemporary teen television shows. Textual analyses, which are usually interpretative, are used to understand latent meanings in texts, and have been successfully transferred and incorporated in humanities in general and television studies in particular (Larsen, 2002, pp. 117–120; McKee, 2003, p. 73). The texts in such research can be programs, series, episodes, clips, etc. (Wickham, 2007, p. x). According to McKee (2003), this method "tries to make educated guesses at some of the most likely interpretations of a text.

[. . .] This happens within a certain cultural frame and a certain time span" (p. 1). Therefore, there is no objective truth; instead, possible interpretations and tendencies are revealed. This in-depth analysis is an exploration of the content of the representational strategies used in audio-visual texts, but also includes visual elements, since gendered media representations are not always verbalized, but may contain gender codes and markers (Jacobson, 2005, p. 18). Thus, the method of thematic textual analysis is a modification of discourse analysis within the tradition of TV and film studies, with an emphasis on different elements of the audiovisual production (Van Kempen, 1995).

As is customary in qualitative research, the sampling of cases is informed by the theoretical importance of cases (see Flick, 2007), or the extent to which the inclusion of particular cases helps in developing a better understanding of the research questions. Hence, considering our interest in analyzing representations of gender roles in contemporary teen television shows, we first selected particular teen television shows that are popular amongst teenagers in Flanders. This popularity was investigated previously using a large-scale survey (N = 1,544), since ratings are not available in Belgium (Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011). The research sample comprises the American series *One Tree Hill* (*Tree*) and *Gossip Girl* (*Girl*), the Canadian series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (*Degrassi*), the British series *Skins*, and the Flemish series *16* +. Each series is regarded as youth-oriented television due to the (almost exclusively) teenaged characters and recurring themes such as music, alcohol and drug (ab)use, and love and relationships (friendship, romantic, or sexual) among high school students. All of the series, except *16* +, are successful international exports and have been nominated for and won several (teen choice) awards, reflecting their importance as popular teen media.

The next step in the two-way sampling included selecting episodes. As representations in TV series can change over time, we decided to select a sample of episodes that consider possible developments of representations in series over time. Whilst it was impossible to analyze all episodes of the selected series we systematically selected for every series the first, eighth, sixteenth, and last episodes and for some series that are shorter and/or have shorter episodes we selected additional episodes randomly. As a result, our sample contains approximately 55 hours of television including sixteen 40-minute-long *Tree* episodes (the first, eighth, sixteenth, and last episodes of the first four seasons); twelve 40-minute-long episodes of *Girl* (the first, fourth, eighth, twelfth, sixteenth, and last episodes of seasons 1 and 2); eighteen 30-minute-long episodes of *16* + (the first, sixth, eighth, twelfth, sixteenth, and last episodes of all three seasons; season 1 had only sixteen episodes, so we included the fourteenth episode in our research sample); nineteen 40-minute-long episodes of *Skins* (the entire first and second seasons, since a season has only 9 or 10 episodes); and forty-one 22-minute-long episodes of *Degrassi* (the complete third and fifth seasons, because these episodes are much shorter than those of the other shows). In so doing we sampled a comprehensive, comparable and manageable selection of episodes of the series included in our analysis. Due to this selection and since plots and subplots are stretched out through multiple episodes, the episodes provide good exemplars of the whole show.

Each selected episode was subdivided into sequences, and each sequence was subsequently analyzed for spoken language, facial expressions, and body language. A more open coding system was applied, and initial coding was loosely structured around to the theoretical insights obtained through the literature review. However, the analysis allowed for new codes to emerge during the coding process. Throughout the coding process, both authors discussed the implementation of old and new codes. More specifically in the process

of coding, gender roles linked with sexual relationships referred to kissing, dating, sexual (suggested) intercourse, safe sex, sexual innuendo, and the sexual double standard (cf. Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002). Non-sexual gender roles referred to any other situation or activity in which teens are represented (e.g., household, school-related topics, sports). The list of codes also consisted of (amongst other) objectification (e.g., looking good is valued over intelligence), sexual objectification (e.g., seeing a person as a means to deflower another person, not for loving him/her and starting a relationship), self-objectification (e.g., exposing cleavage to distract a man), traditional gender roles (e.g., linking femininity to taking care of someone and doing the household), emancipative gender roles (e.g., a successful female artist, a single parent household run by a man), active/passive distinction (e.g., hero/victim, lack of emotions/being emotional) and other noteworthy gender stereotypes (e.g., girls eat when they feel miserable). More evident codes were physical appearance, drug use, smoking, alcohol consumption, violence, sexual (suggestive or explicit) images, contraception, sexual transmitted diseases, sexual double standard, casual sex and friendship.

Results

Non-Sexual Gender Roles in Popular Teen Series

A teenage story? *Tree* is constructed around basketball, and the storylines are built around the male basketball players and their female (passive) sidekicks. Primarily, we follow the story through the eyes of a teenage boy; however, after the first two seasons, the viewers are offered different perspectives, depending on the storyline. In *Girl*, the series initially appears to center around the Big Brother-like Gossip Girl, who reports the latest gossip through her blog. The impression of a self-policing, narcissistic gaze is present in the series: the female characters are aware of having all (male) eyes upon them, maybe even exploiting it and enjoying it. This illustrates a shift in traditional power relationships (Gill, 2007). *Skins* is different, as every episode focuses on one main character, allowing the viewer to follow that specific episode through his or her eyes. Different perspectives are offered in both *16 +* and *Degrassi*, since storylines involving girls, boys, or mixed situations are interchanged. The sampled teen series offer viewers different storylines, focusing on different angles and perspectives, and thus, provide a large tool kit of symbolic resources (cf. Buckingham, 2008).

Each super teen has a happy ending? An active/passive (male/female) dichotomy dominates the *Tree* storylines, as illustrated by recurring examples of helpless girls who are saved by strong, heroic boys (Ward et al., 2002). However, two episodes in the *Tree* sample contain heroines. The same tendency of heroic boys and damsels-in-distress is seen in the other series, though it is less pronounced. Boys sometimes need to be saved as well (e.g., Sid, who is attacked by a female gang [*Skins*]). One distinction of the British series is that not everyone has a happy ending. One of the main characters becomes seriously ill and dies, which lends greater realism to the series. Another main difference is that sex, excessive drinking, and (recreational) drug use are part of the everyday lives of these British teenagers, and these activities are not considered problematic. Remarkably, in almost all the series, adult intervention in conflicts is rare; the teens generally solve their problems or save their friends without any parental help (cf. super-individuals: Aubrun & Grady, 2000). In *Tree*, three of the main characters' fathers and/or mothers are temporarily or permanently absent. *Degrassi* is the only series in which parents are consistently present and aware of

their children's problems. The recurring examples in the American series of female and male characters saving their opponents, achieving their dreams before graduating, being successful (e.g., as a singer, fashion designer, etc.), or attending their preferred university (e.g., *Girl*) represent other depictions of teens as super-individuals. These examples also convey the notion of the "American Dream," which everyone can obtain if they have enough willpower and tenacity. We could not identify this in *Degrassi*, *16 +*, or *Skins*; in contrast, not every teenager gets good grades or endeavors to achieve his or her dream or goals. *Skins* gives a more problematic impression with its depictions of drinking, smoking, and having sex as major issues in teens' lives (cf. youth-as-trouble, Hebdige, 1979).

The emotionally unstable or drug-using teenager? All the characters have eventful lives, but there is a distinction in the way the boys and girls cope with events. Girls are (temporarily) shown as damaged (due to their eventful lives), and each girl often cries over problems in her relationships; male characters, in contrast, handle problems in a much more taciturn, emotionless manner, at least in both American series. Boys are supposed to control their emotions, especially sadness, while girls are allowed to display their emotions freely (cf. Batchelor et al., 2004). The only emotions registered among boys are aggression and jealousy, giving the impression that boys rarely experience sadness and fear. However, the other three series offer several examples of boys displaying emotion (e.g., sadness, fear, and jealousy), therefore allowing more diverse gender roles. We often see girls giggling and chatting, and when they feel sad or experience premenstrual tension, they eat away their misery with chocolates and sweets. Boys, on the other hand, get drunk or seek a one-night stand. According to Brown et al. (2002, p. 3), teenage boys are seen drinking and smoking more often than girls; however, all the series in our sample show both groups drinking. Drinking is shown as a way to have fun or to forget the troubles and heartache caused by others. Smoking and drugs are rarely shown, and if they are, they are mostly male issues. However, *Degrassi* and *16 +* contain a few examples of drug dealing and girls smoking a joint or using hard drugs (*16 +*). Both series show the positive effects of drug use (e.g., having fun, tripping), while marginally addressing the negative consequences. *Skins* is a unique and controversial example where both boys and girls smoke and use or deal drugs regularly. Moreover, the excessive use of drugs and alcohol is portrayed as an everyday fact of teenage life, unlike in the other series, where alcohol and drug use are problems to be solved.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the best looking of all? Most female characters in the American series are (very) thin (cf. Signorielli, 2007), and stereotypical references to diets and eating disorders are made; *Degrassi* and *Skins* address this topic as well. In each series, a girl's physical appearance is often acknowledged by others (cf. Jacobson, 2005, pp. 27–29; Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 147); however, being accepted by the best university is of paramount importance in *Girl*. *Degrassi*, *Skins*, and *16 +*, once again, differ: the female characters are concerned about their looks, but beauty and "looking perfect" are not the girls' main concerns. The boys and girls in the non-American series have more average and normal bodies than those in *Girl* and *Tree*. *Tree* shows stereotypical cheerleaders with perfect, thin bodies, and portrays shopping as a typical female activity that brings joy; the basketball players are stereotypical examples of jocks with athletic bodies. Thus, we can conclude that physical appearance is extremely important for the teenagers in *Tree* and *Girl*, but less vital in the other series. It is worth mentioning that in *Degrassi*, Manny, who already looks good, considers (but does not undergo) plastic surgery to help boost her acting career.

Furthermore, the characters in *Degrassi*, *Skins*, and *16 +* are played by teenage actors and look like average teens, lending more realism, unlike the casts of *Girl* and *Tree*. The American female characters who do not look like teens are often dressed in an extremely feminine and sexual manner (e.g., miniskirts and high heels, showing deep cleavage), and being sexy and good-looking makes them wanted by the popular guys. Even the non-popular girls look good, and none of the female characters in the American series look like the average 16-year-old girl-next-door. They all have a high sense of fashion, although Haley (*Tree*) and Jenny (*Girl*) are less so at the beginning of their series. This changes when they become friends with some of the popular girls: their style becomes more feminine and sexual. This sexualized clothing is also present in the other series, although less pronounced and less consistently.

There are similar differences between the boys in the US and non-US programs. The popular teenagers in both American series are muscular, whereas the male characters in *Degrassi*, *Skins*, and *16 +* have average bodies with less pronounced muscles and abs, making the portrayals more realistic. The boys in *Girl* and *Tree* do not seem concerned about their appearance, although they always look good, or even immaculate. The boys in *16 +*, *Skins*, and *Degrassi* do not seem preoccupied with the way they dress either, and indeed, they look less groomed. However, *Degrassi* offers one counterexample (Marco), reinforcing the stereotypical image of a gay teenager who is concerned about his appearance.

Friends or rivals? The teenage girls habitually see each other as rivals or competitors in both friendly and romantic relationships. Cassie views Michelle as an opponent (*Skins*), and Blair (*Girl*) refers to the friendship between Dan and Vanessa as a problem, especially because Vanessa is beautiful. Indeed, this friendship provokes competition between Vanessa and Dan's girlfriend, Serena. Nayak & Kehily (2008) observe that female characters are often portrayed as sneaky, as is noticeable in all series, evidenced even in the title "Gossip Girl." In *16 +*, this issue is addressed literally when Billie concludes that the girls are *once again* causing trouble. *Degrassi*, *Girl*, and *Skins* nuance this negative gender stereotype and also connect it to boys, for example, when Chuck threatens to tell Nate about his sexual escapades with Blair in the back of his limousine (*Girl*). Girls are also rivals with respect to popularity, and physical appearance is the most important element in this battle, again, highlighting the importance of the female characters' physical appearance (Nayak & Kehily, 2008, p. 147). *16 +* provides examples of boys being jealous and seeing the other as their rival. Boys regularly use or abuse their gender-related physical power to channel their anger or frustrations (cf. Signorielli, 2007, pp. 174–175). In addition to boys starting or getting into fights, in our research sample, girls are also shown fighting, and one episode of *Skins* even portrays a female gang attacking random people on the street. However, this fighting is clearly gendered: the girls scratch, ruin each other's clothes, and pull hair, while the boys use their fists, aiming for their opponent's face and stomach.

Traditional stereotypes or emancipative representations? Female stereotypes follow traditional gender roles, like housekeeping (Jacobson, 2005, pp. 6, 25–26). However, there are a few examples of boys doing household-related activities, like cleaning or cooking (*Skins*, *16 +*, *Girl*). Nevertheless, there are non-traditional representations: Jake (*Tree*) runs a single-parent household with his one-year-old daughter, since the mother disappeared after giving birth, and Billie is taken care of by his father, as his mother left seeking more freedom (*16 +*]/i]; idem *Girl*). In *Tree*, Haley's dream is to be a singer, and when this

opportunity presents itself, she leaves everyone (her teenage husband and friends) to pursue her career. This seems like an emancipative representation of a woman who makes a radical choice; however, she eventually returns because her success had no value without her family and friends. Hence, this emancipation transforms into a rather stereotypical and traditional representation of female ambition.

Sexual Gender Roles in Popular Teen Series

The objectification of the self, the other, and their sexuality. Several authors (e.g., Bindig, 2008; Nayak & Kehily, 2008) have concluded that female characters in teen dramas are regularly degraded as (sexual) objects. This study, however, recognizes multi-layered and versatile teenage characters who are more than bodies with good looks. Notwithstanding, *Tree*, *Girl* and *Skins* contain multiple moments in which characters are objectified, and one example could be found in *Degrassi*. This objectification manifests in two ways. First, the female characters, who regularly use their curves to get what they want or to intimidate a boy, are scheming (self-objectification). From a post-feminist perspective, this can be seen as a modernization of femininity and an example of empowerment, although this shift remains problematic (Gill, 2007). Jal (*Skins*), for instance, wears a short dress, exposing her legs and some cleavage, when she goes out to a club, ensuring that she gets in for free. Our sample contains no example of boys using their bodies similarly; however, all series contain examples of girls who do *not* use their bodies to accomplish goals. Furthermore, in both *Girl* and *Skins*, girls are—more often than boys—reduced to sexual objects. Effy's virginity is the bet in a game between Tony and Josh; thus, a girl can be a *gift* between two male friends, e.g., Michelle, who is *offered* to Sid by Tony (*Skins*), and (pictures of) female characters are used to give boys sexual pleasure. Craig (*Degrassi*) dates two girls and compares it to buying a product: he is trying them both out before choosing one. This sexual objectification is not only performed by male characters; girls also objectify themselves. Cassie must deflower Sid, an arrangement organized by Tony and Michelle (*Skins*). Furthermore, in *Girl*, female bodies and girls' sexuality are mentioned as part of the consumer culture ("goods" you pay for) or as a prize that can be claimed by boys. During Ivy Week, for instance, girls are paid only to give the male attendants (sexual) pleasure and are mentioned in the same context as served drinks and food. We can link this kind of degradation to the oft-noted active/passive distinction between male and female characters and their sexuality (Jacobson, 2005) and the traditional view that a woman is supposed to serve her man. In *Girl*, male characters are objectified as well, although more subtly. Some of the teenage girls use one boy to make another boy jealous. Sometimes, two teenagers use each other for their own reasons: Jenny is dating the rich Asher to climb the social ladder, whereas Asher is using Jenny to conceal his sexual orientation. Jana (*16 +*) states that boys are there to be used, but no examples support her statement.

(The insinuation of) Sexually active teenagers. Generally, the series convey the impression that teenagers are very sexually active. This impression becomes stronger with recurring examples of casual sex. Brooke and Felix were once "friends with benefits" (*Tree*), and Cassie, not wanting a relationship, prefers "mindless sex" with boys and girls (*Skins*). The fun element is very important (i.e., "it's just sex") in such flings (cf. youth-as-fun versus youth-as-trouble; Hebdige, 1979). Each series, however, also contains several examples of teenagers who do not rush to have sex, thereby portraying sex as meaningful. Yet the lack

of references to contraception and safe sex in (casual) sexual relationships is problematic. Nonetheless, both *Degrassi* and *16* +1 contain more examples of sex as part of a committed relationship than casual sex.

In most of the series, the sexual act is implied with fade-outs, and in the American, Canadian, and Flemish series, there is no overt intercourse, probably due to the programming time, the target audience, and dominant norms and values. Passionate kissing and embracing are the most common acts in our sample, which confirms Cope-Farrar and Kunkel's (2002) results. However, *Skins* contains examples of nudity and visible sexual intercourse between teenagers, and is, therefore, the most liberal and controversial series in our sample. We assume that these examples—among other things—provoked the series' 18 +1 label and the rather late programming hour. In our *Tree* and *Girl* samples, kissing is shown only between straight couples; *Degrassi*, *Skins*, and *16* +1 also show passionate same-sex kissing. With respect to sexual behavior (from passionate kissing to sexual intercourse), the girls mostly initiate it and decide when it will happen. They set and guard their boundaries, and when their partner initiates something for which they are not ready, they object, and the boys mostly respect that. Anka taking Anwar's hand and placing it between her thighs (*Skins*) illustrates this finding. Sid stopping during foreplay because he is not in love with Michelle (*Skins*) is a counterexample that also defies the sexual double standard. Thus, female sexuality as passive and restricted (Aubrey, 2004, p. 506) is transformed into a more positive, active, and emancipative gender script. However, the aforementioned *problem* of the objectification of the female body and sexuality (performed by both boys and girls) offers a more negative perspective of this emancipative female gender script. Both American series contain examples of male characters who do not respect girls' sexual boundaries.

Sexuality as part of teens' identity construction. In each series, having a (sexual) partner is important to the teenagers' identity construction. Sexuality and virginity define the teenagers' identities in *Skins*. Seventeen-year-old Sid is a virgin, and this embarrasses his friends; they think he needs help with this "problem." Pandora, a young girl, is introduced to some male friends as a virgin, which underlines the importance of sex for a teenager in the twenty-first century. Teenagers on television think about who they are and reflect on who they want to be through (sexual) relationships. Especially when a relationship fails, teenagers realize that they have lost themselves while giving their heart to the person they loved. However, love is not always considered negative. In our American series, love is idealized in certain situations and portrayed as capable of overcoming and challenging everything. We could not identify examples of this in *16* +1, *Skins*, or *Degrassi*. However, two examples from *Girl* and *16* +1 show how the idealization of sexual intercourse is broken, and that sex can destroy the happiness between two characters: Serena does not want to rush things with Erin, since they are doing so well (*Girl*), and Anthony is in love with Annabelle, but does not want to jeopardize their friendship (*16* +1).

Sex is a normal step in a romantic relationship, and one that is taken rapidly and sometimes even hastily—without discussing it with the partner. More so, most relationships in these series do not last long; flings and casual sexual encounters appear to be the norm. There are, however, three exceptions in *Tree* and *Degrassi*. Haley is afraid to have sex for the first time, and she decides to wait until marriage. Her partner visits porn sites to cope with his sexual frustration, but later admits that he also wants to wait and help her overcome her fear (*Tree*). The second example is the "Clean Teens"—a group of teenagers (mostly girls) who are against sex before marriage. However, they are scorned and considered freaks, and

disappear silently (*Tree*). A similar group, the "Friendship Club," appears in *Degrassi*. The connection between sexuality and teenagers' boundaries, values, and norms is drawn in this subplot. The teenagers seek their own sexual identity, and relationships make them reflect on themselves. Moreover, in *Girl*, having sex raises your social status, but lying about it is unforgivable and has the opposite effect.

Different gender, different sexual standard? Mostly, boys are easily seduced; this is explicitly stated multiple times in *Tree* and *Girl*. No similar examples are identified in *Degrassi*, *16 +*, or *Skins*, at least not on the level of narration. However, *Skins* contains a few examples of boys being easily seduced and distracted when cleavage and breasts are accentuated. This can be linked to the double standard (Aubrey, 2004), which is evident in all the series: a man is always thinking about sex and never turns down an opportunity for sex, as when Anwar refuses to let Sketch in until she tells him she wants to have sex with him (*Skins*). In contrast to *Tree*, *Girl* and *Skins* both contain counterexamples where boys decline sex. A manifestation of different standards for boys and girls is found in the different labels that boys and girls get when they sleep around: boys are "cool" and girls are "slutty," e.g., Annabel (*16 +*) is compared to a highway that everyone drives on. Similar examples are found in the other series. This double standard is addressed in *Tree*: Haley, Peyton, Brooke, and Anna agree that they should stop abiding by the double standards created by men and just be happy.

Explicit sexual references in the discussions between the characters are recurrent in each series, mostly between girls. Such talk among female teenagers may be considered an emancipative gender script in which they are depicted as active sexual creatures. Each series contains a wide range of examples of female characters and their sexual desires. Another positive and emancipative gender script can be found when female masturbation is insinuated: once in *Girl* and twice in *Skins*. *Skins* also depicts several boys masturbating. Hazel surfing for pornography on the internet is another example illustrating teenage girls as sexual (*Degrassi*). Sexual interaction is contextualized as a political statement once in *Girl*, with Lexi, who sleeps with boys on the first date as a blow against male domination. However, it is questionable whether Lexi's stance achieves the desired result or is instead a confirmation of the double standard. This is yet another example of the objectification of the female body and sexuality, and one of (false) empowerment.

"Casual" and risk-free sexual behavior. Earlier, it was mentioned that risk-free, recreational sex is common in the youth-oriented series, and the fun element is very important in these flings. In the American series, sex generally occurs smoothly and easily, and the use of contraceptives is never mentioned. The use of condoms appears in *Skins*, although rarely, and only one example was found in *16 +*. However, safe sex and the use of condoms are regularly promoted and addressed in *Degrassi*, although the show also contains examples of condom failure or the lack of use of contraceptives. The only negative consequence connected to sex in our sample is a possible teen pregnancy. Each show contains one or more examples of girls getting pregnant while in high school. The possible emotional consequences of sexual interaction are rarely addressed, confirming Aubrey's (2004) findings. The only such example is found in *Girl*, when Blair feels ashamed that she lost her virginity to Chuck—who she is not dating—in the back of his limousine. This exception can be seen as rather stereotypical in that emotions are, again, connected to girls. The idealization of smooth and risk-free sex is breached in *Skins*, when STDs are mentioned, and one of the main characters suffers erectile dysfunction while recovering from a traffic accident.

All of the series contain several other more traditional (and stereotypical) gendered discourses. Romantic relationships involve two popular and attractive characters; the physical attractiveness of both sexes is considered important in a love relationship, and boys prefer girls who are sexually attractive. For *Girl*'s main characters, we can add wealth and status. We must nuance this for the other three series, since the teenagers do not look like those in *Girl* and *Tree*. In *Girl*, Chuck is the stereotypical male who is afraid to commit to one woman: he loves Blair, but leaves her because he refuses to "play husband and wife," although this leaves him lonely, alone, and seeking random sexual partners. The same can be said for Tony (*Skins*), who only realizes that he loves Michelle after their relationship ends. Three examples illustrate stereotypical representations of heterosexual and heteronormative teenage male fantasies: Nate has a (sexual) relationship with an older, married woman (*Girl*), Chris falls in love with a female teacher with whom he will start a (sexual) relationship (*Skins*), and Chuck (who is a minor) has (paid) sex with numerous older women (*Girl*).

Conclusion

The textual analysis of five popular teen series shows that the media (among other agents) produce commodified meanings and convey how gender is and should be lived. There is a vibrant global market for youth-oriented television, and we believe that each series offers an articulation of the assumed universality of a youthful identity and provides the youth a plethora of symbolic resources (Levine, 2009). However, the contexts in which these series are received differ. The programs may be read and interpreted differently depending on the personal characteristics of the audience, the cultural and social viewing context, and timeframe. Therefore, audience research and in-depth interviews with producers are necessary.

The general findings of the entire research sample are the recognition of the sexual double standard and the insinuation that there can be "bad" or "good" sexuality. Sex is often implied in teen series and is idealized as smooth and easy, and sexuality is often minimized. Twenty-first-century teenagers and sexual fluidity/casual sex are intermingled in contemporary teen fiction, where sex has become part of "having fun." Teens are shown experimenting with sexuality, since it matters to who they are. Those over the age of 16 are assumed to be (hetero)sexually active, and not having a sex life is often considered problematic. Female sexuality is no longer regarded as passive and restricted in teen series, but has become more active and empowered. The (few) examples of girls masturbating or surfing for pornography illustrate this. Moreover, girls confidently discuss sexuality, voicing sexual desires and initiating sexual relationships. This may be seen as a positive and emancipative gender script; however, the practice of objectifying the female (and male) body and sexuality casts this script in a more negative light. Moreover, this positive, empowered femininity is still connected to traditional gender expectations concerning guarding personal boundaries and contraception. However, we must mention that references to contraceptives and safe sex in (casual) sexual relationships are lacking, and we see this as a missed opportunity for the producers. While teen dramas are not solely designed to educate, educational storylines and entertainment can go hand in hand.

Aside from these general conclusions, obvious differences in the representations of masculinity and femininity between the American and non-American teen drama series were found. The American teenage girl is extremely good-looking (e.g., flawless skin, feminine curves), confident about her body and sexuality, and sometimes uses these as a "means to an end" (e.g., scheming). She is empowered and knows what she wants in life

and how to get it, and looks nothing like the average teen, due to the age of the actor. The focus on the female body is omnipresent in these series, as most of the female characters are (very) thin, and their physical appearance is often evaluated by others (cf. Nayak & Kehily, 2008). The impression is that a *sexy* body is the key source of identity, success, popularity (in life and relationships), and power (cf. Gill, 2007), which reconfirms the importance of the beauty ideal in American fiction. Although these extremely feminine girls are confident and often strong characters, the search for a true soul mate and lover dominates their happiness (e.g., Haley's career). The male characters are often called upon to save the damsel-in-distress, and a boy's masculinity is expressed through his muscular torso and his practice of objectifying girls' bodies and sexuality. The presence of the sexual double standard can be read as an articulation of masculinity, as is the fact that teenage boys are easily seduced and rarely turn down sex. Moreover, a traditional approach to emotions is noticed, since boys often seem to lack emotional intelligence. We can say that the American series offer viewers a fictional world in which extremely feminine and sexy girls and super masculine boys are successful in life (cf. super-individuals and American Dream). A post-feminist approach to female sexuality is evident; however, so are more traditional representations. Moreover, this ideal fictional world is ruled by heteronormativity, and it fails to address the topics of contraception and STDs.

Contrary to the previous results, the teenagers in the non-American series have more average bodies, and therefore, give more realistic and diverse portrayals of regular teenagers. The fact that these characters are played by teens instead of actors in their twenties also contributes to this realism. We believe that national differences in the production processes may influence the choice of actors in the non-American series. North America has a long history of producing youth-oriented series, different funding sources, bigger budgets, and larger exports. Generally, *Degrassi*, *Skins*, and *16 +* offer fewer stereotypes (e.g., both girls and boys are shown dealing with emotions) and a more diverse and liberal spectrum of gendered representations. These representations reflect the nations' more liberal ideas about sexuality. An illustration of the less liberal American context can be found in the editing of certain *Degrassi* episodes aired on US channels because they address topics like teen abortion. Conversely, the American series incorporate national aspects as well, such as the idea of the American Dream and the fitness- and dating cultures. Although heteronormativity is recognized in these series, they also offer viewers alternative perspectives, with gay storylines involving main characters, same-sex kissing, and the inclusion of sex. Safe sex is promoted more often in the non-US series: contraception is discussed and condoms are visible.

To conclude, we believe that the "hypersexual" media content (Jacobson, 2005) should be nuanced. There are, in fact, little (*Skins*) or no explicit representations of sexual intimacy in teen series. However, explicit sexual references in dialogues are increasingly evident, as are implied sexual behaviors and casual sex among teens. Whereas in the 1990s, series such as *Dawson's Creek* focused on the romantic and affective aspects of a relationship (Bindig, 2008), the sexual aspect of a relationship has clearly become part of the spectacle of teen series and is one of the core themes of recent youth-oriented programs.

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